

A messy carousel. Appropriation, ethno-preneurship and audiovisual repatriation

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Impressions of Vanuatu shot by Christina Stuhlberger for the documentary 'Kastom Kopiraet', by Hugo DeBlock, Christina Stuhlberger and An van Dienderen (forthcoming)

What does the West do with objects and human remains that were 'amassed' or 'collected' (exchanged, traded or, often stolen) during the colonial period? What are the trajectories that such objects and their social lives lead when moving from the hands of the makers into those of the transactors, buyers, consumers, and admirers?

The calls for the repatriation or restitution of such (art) objects and human remains are currently reverberating strongly. In recent years, Germany has returned human remains to Namibia, Australia, and Hawaii, amongst others. Furthermore, the country has invested in provenance research at its museums to closely investigate the collections. In an infamous speech, delivered at the University of Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso in 2017, French President Macron, made a promise to return all art and artefacts from the French collections that were stolen in colonial contexts to the mother countries in Africa.

However, no matter how often it is stated that colonialism is long behind us, the repository of the vast majority of colonial (art) heritage indicates the opposite. Human remains in collections are the remainders of scientific racism in the West, which was largely based on speculations but formed how 'we' looked at and treated 'the other'. There is no valid reason to keep these remains, which indicate the leftovers of overt racism, in museums. Human remains deserve to be rehumanised, by being (re)buried in their places of origin. In the case of (art) objects, the context is more complex and diverse, as objects have been traded or exchanged, given or stolen, and there is a lack of research regarding how these things came to be in museums in the first place.

The images you see above are from the documentary film *Kastom Kopiraet* (forthcoming). The film attempts to approach these issues through actual experiences in Vanuatu. This film is inspired by the long-term ethnographic fieldwork that was conducted by anthropologist Hugo DeBlock in this archipelago. Formerly known as the New Hebrides, Vanuatu is an island nation-state in the Southwest Pacific, in the culture region of Melanesia. As the New Hebrides, it was administered by an Anglo-French Condominium, from 1906 to 1980, after which it became independent and adopted the contemporary name, Vanuatu ('Vanua' means 'land' and 'tu' is 'our'; translated as 'our country').

The culture and arts of Vanuatu captured the imagination of the West from the beginning of their historical contact. From the late 19th century onwards, when a collecting frenzy was raging through the area, the arts of Vanuatu became well known and well represented in Western museums and private collections. Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and André Breton are known to have owned objects from Vanuatu in their private collections. From the early days of (documentary) filmmaking, filmmakers also visited the islands and made the inhabitants the subject of their imagination.

'Traditionally', it was assumed that the people of Vanuatu were hostile and were considered evil, dark cannibals. The first film that was made in Vanuatu, *Among the Cannibal Isles of the South Pacific*, focused heavily on this main trope. The footage for the film was shot by Martin and Osa Johnson, and it was released in 1918, that is four years before Robert Flaherty's legendary film, *Nanook of the North*.

In his research, Hugo DeBlock focused on the trade of art objects in and out of Vanuatu in the context of cultural revivalism and tourism. He concentrated on the relationship between different stakeholders, such as local makers, collectors, and tourists. According to people from the area, the objects that are for sale now in the contemporary settings, still contain the power of bygone days. Others do not agree and believe that the current revivalist movement and the money that is made on the basis of the age-old *kastom* (translated as 'custom') is a highly problematic and disputable practice.

Potential buyers flock to the places where rituals and ceremonial artefacts are reproduced and sold. In some of these places, they are welcome visitors, in other places, they are carefully kept away from the 'back scene' of the performance grounds. Sometimes, some of the artefacts that were used are sold there. Often, they are burned or left in the bush to rot, as they can be seen as too powerful to be kept or, even, sold. Most of the local sculptors in Vanuatu now create art according to the taste of the Parisian or New York auctioneers. They deliver what the buyer wants, which is, real, authentic, and is also authentically made. Here the term *ethno-preneur*, which means the local entrepreneur who knows the market and responds to it by making what is expected based on his ethnicity, is introduced. In this myriad of meaning and values, it has become increasingly difficult, for local people, to distinguish what, for them, is 'real' and 'authentic' culture, and what is 'fake', 'forgery', or '*kiaman kastom*' (liar's *kastom*).

When documentary filmmaker, An van Dienderen read Hugo's research, she immediately identified the potential to make a critical and relevant documentary. One that could develop an original angle on the urgent debate on repatriation and decolonisation of museum collections. This theme ties in seamlessly with her former work, in which she has been exploring various documentary strategies and the anthropological relationship between oneself and others. In her work, she examines the contrast between fact and fiction, imagination and observation, and representation and experience. Subsequently, filmmaker Christina Stuhlberger joined the team in an attempt to explore further possibilities based on her interests in encounters and understanding of local stories from various regions, through a very personal approach to film making. Her work is an attempt to connect to those local stories and viewpoints in the light of an increasingly globalised world, where variation and locality are somewhat dissolving.

We find each other in the elaboration of the documentary *Kastom Kopiraet* where we want to raise questions about the dynamics, the appropriation and exchange of objects, and the stories and practices between the West and Vanuatu. We do this by considering the *Lengnangulong*, a spiritual stone 'collected' in Vanuatu in 1949 and exhibited in the Pavillon des Sessions of the Musée du Louvre in Paris since 2000. The sacred stone was bought by the French anthropologist, Jean Guiart in

1949. Guiart donated the stone, which is sculpted in the shape of a human face, a little later, to the Musée de l'Homme. The place and position of Lengnangulong is subject to debate in both France and Vanuatu. In Vanuatu, it is said that Guiart stole the stone and that he bought it (for next to nothing) from people who were not rightful owners of the stone. The first request for repatriation of the precious stone dates back to 1997 and correspondence regarding the same is ongoing. In Vanuatu, this stone was used while performing rituals. In the Louvre, the stone is displayed in an improper capacity as a museum object. It is said that the stone haunts the Louvre at night, trying to escape and return to Vanuatu. The people of Vanuatu want the stone back as they believe that it is lonely in the Louvre.

In the film, we create a speculative trajectory of the stone back to Vanuatu as it embarks on a road trip across the archipelago, where communities undergo rapid social change. Labour migration, foreign investments, and digital communication collide with the traditional decentralised, self-sustaining, and subsidiarity community structures. Lengnangulong's journey will be a collective reverie, an imagined space where dreams and nightmares, and the past and future, consolidate into a surreal vanishing point of modernity. For this, Kastom Kopiraet employs cinema, a technique par excellence for the imaginary.

Through the trajectory of the Lengnangulong, we wish to explore a blurry 'messiness' which is typical of the relationships that have developed over the centuries between the West, and its 'other', between the white man and 'his' exotic. With Kastom Kopiraet we want to explore far-reaching connections that exist between global and local dynamics. What is the significance of a tribal object in its local community and how does it transform when it begins its trajectory to the West and back?

The subject of the film is kopiraet, which in Bislama, the Vanuatu Pidgin language, means native copyright or collective authorship. Kastom is an adaptation of the English word 'custom' which is often translated as culture. Kastom Kopiraet was considered to be collective copyright, but under the influence of Western interest, many people of Vanuatu now claim this right individually, and this results in numerous conflicts. We find this blending of collective and individual authorship in Vanuatu inspiring in the manner in which we understand the authorship of the documentary itself. We wish to extend the questions that Kastom Kopiraet raises about authorship to the way in which we, as directors, deal with the authorship of the documentary itself. In the documentary, experiences are exchanged between Europe and Vanuatu. Our film can therefore be seen as a vehicle that navigates between the West and Vanuatu, so as to form an audiovisual repatriation of the Lengnangulong.

In this tangle of connections, associations, and paradoxes, we also portray our own uncertainty about these relationships and about our mental furniture. In our globalised, contemporary world, not only the exotic other, but also the static notion of what the West would be, crumble. In Kastom Kopiraet we look for a way to break open the taxidermy operation of mainstream documentaries to give room to these complex relationships.

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More information: <https://www.anvandienderen.net/kastom-kopiraet/>